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Assessing Employee Happiness using the University Happiness Index

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Abstract

Recognizing the significance of employee well-being, the top management of a public university has established a committee to evaluate employee satisfaction using the PERMAI model, which encompasses positive emotions (P), engagement (E), relationships (R), meaning (M), achievement (A), and infrastructure (I). Data were collected using a 37-item survey instrument via an online application called AppsWarga in May, July, August, and September 2024. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics to determine employee happiness across six dimensions, in relation to the overall university score, faculty, and campus. Overall, employees are moderately satisfied with their work at the university, and their levels of happiness vary according to the index.

Keywords: Engagement; Relationship; Meaning; Achievement

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1.0 Introduction

Happiness is a mental or emotional state of well-being that can be defined by, among others, positive or pleasant emotions ranging from contentment to intense joy. The feeling of happiness may differ from one employee to another due to numerous factors, such as demographics, health, background, and job scope, as contended by Gerdtham and Johannesson (2001) and Kawamoto et al. (1999). While employee happiness is systematically linked to productivity, it is consistent with a causal relationship between employee well-being and performance. Hence, evaluating employees' happiness has become crucial, as it may help organizations craft the right strategies to accelerate goal achievement. Employee happiness is crucial for an organization to achieve its vision and mission, as employees are the driving force behind the organization, propelling it toward its desired goals and objectives.

Recognizing its importance, the top management of a public university has established a committee to evaluate employee satisfaction. Thus, this study evaluates employee happiness based on the PERMAI model, which represents positive emotions (P), engagement (E), relationship (R), meaning (M), achievement (A), and infrastructure (I). It is an extended model developed specifically for the university to assess the level of employee satisfaction, enabling management to take action to improve existing conditions. It is based on the well-being model by Martin Seligman (2018), with an added dimension of infrastructure.

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2.0 Literature Review

The critical role of employee well-being in higher education institutions (HEIs) for institutional prosperity and innovation is widely acknowledged. A supportive work environment enhances faculty and staff satisfaction, which in turn positively impacts student achievement. Research demonstrates a clear link between employee happiness and educational quality across teaching, research, and student services.

Silva Munar et al. (2020) conducted a study across HEIs in Chile, Colombia, and Spain, uncovering six dimensions of organizational contentment, including significance, dependable relationships, and engagement. Through a Delphi method, assessing the views of academic and support personnel, the study revealed a positive disposition towards happy workplaces, highlighting the necessity of effective management strategies that support the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Moreover, Verma and Ahmed (2023) emphasize the role of leadership in promoting academic well-being post-pandemic, advocating for policies that ensure academic freedom, balance, and mindfulness. These strategies suggest that assessing employee happiness can significantly elevate educational practices and spur innovation. Collectively, these findings highlight the impact of employee satisfaction on the success of HEIs. By prioritizing well-being, institutions can enhance retention, improve efficiency, and enhance student learning, thereby enriching the quality and reach of higher education.

2.1. Employee Happiness

Employee happiness has become a key factor in the higher education landscape, acknowledged not only as its impact on individual well-being but also as a crucial component influencing the energy and achievement of higher education institutions. The relationship between an employee's happiness and organizational performance, as well as academic quality, has been highlighted in recent research, revealing a significant, direct correlation. Research conducted by Bhatia and Mohsin (2020), as well as studies from Sarwar et al. (2023) and Al-Shami et al. (2023), have shed light on how an employee's emotional state significantly influences their productivity, creativity, and commitment to their institution. These findings have catalyzed growing support for strategies that focus on integrating happiness into the core of workplace culture. Institutions that place a high value on employee happiness can create an environment that enhances staff well-being and leads to exceptional organizational performance, thereby raising the standard of education offered.

2.2 Dimensions of Employee Happiness

The PERMA Model, developed by Martin Seligman, highlights five essential elements for well-being: positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning, and achievement, which are key to both personal fulfillment and a vibrant professional setting (Seligman, 2018). Positive emotions refer to the experience of joy, gratitude, hope, love, and other uplifting emotions. It involves focusing on the pleasant aspects of life and cultivating a positive outlook. They are crucial for job satisfaction and resilience, reducing turnover (Nair et al., 2021); fostering these emotions can also boost innovation (Al-Shami et al., 2023).

Engagement refers to being fully immersed and absorbed in activities that utilize one's strengths and challenge one's skills, often referred to as "flow." It enhances job satisfaction and performance, showing the importance of employee well-being for organizational health (Lahap et al., 2022). Many factors can influence employee engagement, including work-related, organizational, and environmental factors. The role of researchers is to identify the prevalent factors relevant to specific study contexts.

Supportive relationships among staff, faculty, and management foster a work environment that is essential for overall well-being (Shaari et al., 2022). Relationships generally refer to positive, meaningful connections with others that provide support, love, and companionship. They foster a sense of belonging and are essential to well-being. Moreover, supportive relationships are essential for employees to perform their jobs effectively. Studies, such as those by López-Cabarcos et al. (2022), have extensively supported this notion.

Meaningfulness refers to having a sense of purpose or belonging to something greater than oneself. It is derived from contributing to a cause, group, or goal that transcends individual interests. Work meaningfulness increases job satisfaction and reduces burnout, aligning individual values with organizational goals (Sakarji et al., 2021). Studies have shown that meaningful work increases employee job performance (Fürstenberg et al., 2021; Panda et al., 2022).

Achievement refers to pursuing and achieving goals, mastering skills, and feeling progress and competence. It involves striving for personal and professional success. Employees who achieve their KPIs tend to feel more motivated to set and achieve higher goals. Similarly, when they fail to achieve the assigned KPIs, they feel demotivated to pursue higher goals and remain at the same level. A few studies have supported this claim (Murcahyanto et al., 2022; Susanto et al., 2023).

Lastly, infrastructure tailored to meet the specific needs of university settings is crucial for enhancing productivity and employee satisfaction. Technology and flexible arrangements play significant roles in modernizing the workplace (Sharifah Syahirah et al., 2022). This domain was added to the original PERMA model because infrastructure has a significant influence on employee happiness. Employees cannot work happily if the organization fails to provide the necessary facilities and equipment to facilitate their work. Numerous studies have supported this claim: Infrastructure leads to employee happiness (Fitria et al., 2023) and job performance (Yani, 2022).

Regularly assessing employee happiness is critical for identifying areas for improvement and shaping policies to enhance well-being, promote academic excellence, and foster a positive work culture (Arora, 2020; Joo & Lee, 2017). This strategy is fundamental to the strategic development of universities, aiming to create an environment where innovation and satisfaction thrive.

3.0 Research Methodology

3.1 Research Design

The Theory-Driven Approach (Chen & Rossi, 1983) is adopted as the foundational framework in this research. The framework unfolds through distinct stages: objective definition, selection of theoretical frameworks, development of survey instruments, data collection, data analysis, interpretation of findings, and validation and refinement of the research framework.

3.2 Selection of Theoretical Frameworks

Various psychological models of well-being have been extensively studied, including utilitarian, virtue, hedonic, eudaimonic, hybrid PERMA, and self-determination (Lambert et al., 2015). Among these models, the PERMA framework stands out for its holistic approach to assessing well-being. This paper utilizes the PERMAI model, a novel extension of PERMA that includes an additional domain, infrastructure (I). The PERMAI model comprises six domains—Positive Emotion (P), Engagement (E), Relationships (R), Meaning (M), Accomplishment (A), and Infrastructure (I)—providing a comprehensive framework for assessing well-being that considers both internal psychological factors and external environmental influences.

3.3 Survey Instrument Development

A comprehensive survey instrument has been devised utilizing the PERMAI model. Drawing from the six domains of the PERMAI model, nine subdomains were identified: personal, work, job satisfaction, administrative process, leadership, self-efficacy, personal achievement, infrastructure, and infostructure. This leads to the creation of a tailored 37-survey item.

A Likert Scale-based (Norman, 2010) happiness measure was customized for the study's context and participants and validated for reliability and validity. It offers six options, from 1 to 5, plus an extra option for non-feeling-related items. After collecting responses, it is vital to categorize them into specific level ranges. This categorization, based on Hills and Argyle (2002), determines the level of happiness, comprising Very Unhappy (1-<25%), Unhappy (25%-<50%), Neutral (50% -<51%), Moderately Happy (51% - <75%), Happy (75% - <95%), and Very Happy (95% - 100%).

Moreover, the instrument's reliability and usability were ensured through validation using Cronbach's alpha coefficient, which assesses internal consistency. High Cronbach's alpha values (>0.7) for all domains affirm the instrument's credibility and reliability in assessing employee happiness levels.

3.4 Data Collection Procedure

After developing the instruments, data collection began by distributing surveys to university staff. A unique approach involved integrating the survey into daily routines, with staff answering 2-3 questions before clocking in for work. This integration was achieved through AppsWarga, an online attendance system, which minimized biases and enhanced the findings.

The 37-item survey was distributed monthly, excluding weekends and public holidays, to ensure optimal participation and accommodate staff schedules. This process was repeated over four survey cycles conducted in May, July, August, and September 2023. Remarkably, an average of 17,000 employees participated in each cycle, providing a substantial volume of data.

3.5. Data Analysis

Before analyzing the data, a thorough data cleaning process was conducted, excluding entries with more than 70% missing values to ensure integrity and accuracy.

Subsequently, the data were categorized into three main groups: Faculty Shah Alam, which encompasses 18 faculties and four colleges; Smart Campuses, consisting of 12 campuses and one PTJ (Responsibility Center); and they are further segmented based on academic vs. non-academic roles and gender.

Next, each participant's happiness level was determined by aggregating their responses and calculating an average score, offering insights into overall happiness. Then, descriptive statistics were used for data analysis, examining employee happiness across six domains and determining scores for the overall university, each faculty, campus, gender, and academic vs. non-academic roles. This comprehensive analysis enables a detailed examination of happiness levels among employees across various dimensions and subgroups within the university setting.

4.0 Findings and Discussion

4.1 Respondents' Profile

Data was collected in four phases. Table 1 shows some demographic information of the respondents. In each phase, more than 10,000 employees participated in the survey. Female respondents outnumbered male respondents. Additionally, the number of academic staff exceeded that of administrative staff. This distribution represents the composition of the university's staff.

Table 1: Respondents' Profile

Gender Category				
Respondent	P1	P2	P3	P4
Male	4837	4846	4842	4822
Female	5192	5212	5208	5193
Overall	10029	10058	10050	10015

Position Category				
Respondent	P1	P2	P3	P4
Academic	5103	5108	5101	5079
Administration	4926	4950	4949	4936
Overall	10029	10058	10050	10015

4.2. Overall Findings (UHI-PERMAI)

Table 2: University's Happiness Index according to Domains

Domain	P1	P2	P3	P4	Overall
Positive Emotion	72	73	72	72	72
Engagement	70	71	71	71	71
Relationship	74	74	73	74	74
Meaning	76	77	76	77	76
Achievement	73	74	73	74	74
Infrastructure	70	71	71	71	71
Overall	72	73	72	72	72

Table 2 presents the happiness index based on the six domains: positive emotion, engagement, relationship, meaning, achievement, and infrastructure. In short, it is known as PERMAI. The findings demonstrate consistency in the score across the four phases, indicating that the score obtained accurately reflects the respondents' true feelings on each domain. For all six domains, the employees are moderately happy with UHI scores ranging from 71 for engagement and infrastructure to 74 for relationship and achievement. However, employees are generally satisfied with the domain meaning, with an average score of 76. It suggests that working with the university offers employees unique benefits, which align with previous studies (Sakarji et al., 2021). They feel proud of working with the university, regardless of what happens within it.

4.3. Findings according to the Faculty (PERMAI)

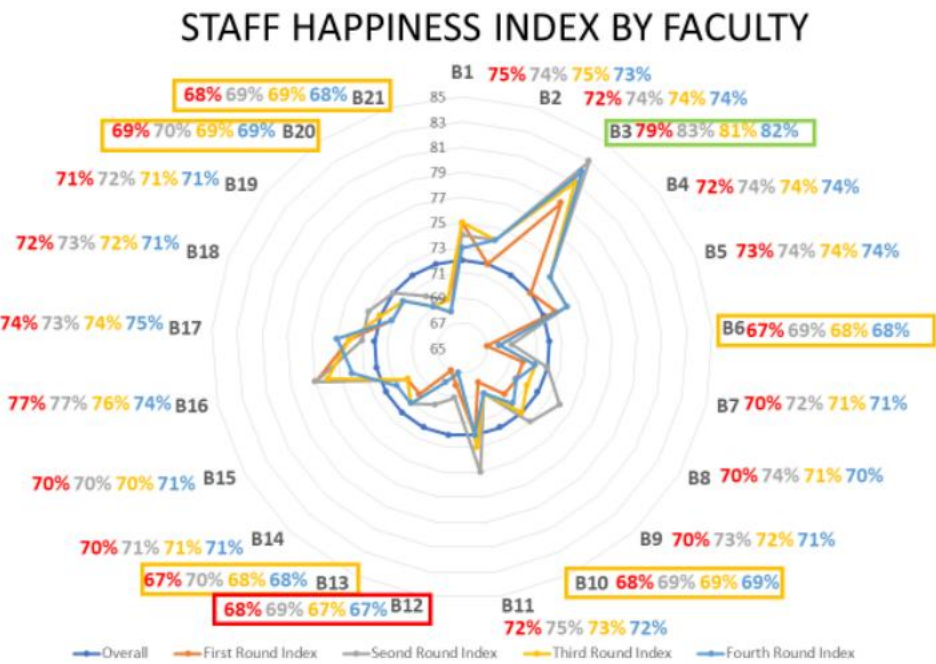


Fig. 1: University Happiness Index according to Faculties

An analysis was also conducted to examine the faculty's happiness index. The findings are shown in Figure 1. The name of the faculty is not disclosed due to confidentiality issues. Again, the score obtained by each faculty was consistent across the four phases. Most faculties scored 70 or higher, indicating that the faculty members were generally satisfied. Some faculties achieved a score of 75 or 82

higher, indicating that their faculty members were satisfied. The findings are consistent with those of Lahap et al. (2022), Sakarji et al. (2021), and Shaari et al. (2022). However, some faculties obtained a score lower than 70, indicating that their faculty members were moderately unhappy with their respective faculty. Further investigation is required for those who obtained lower scores on the happiness index. They need to examine which domains contribute to the low score and determine what corrective measures must be taken to improve the score in the future.

4.4. Findings according to the Campus (PERMAI)

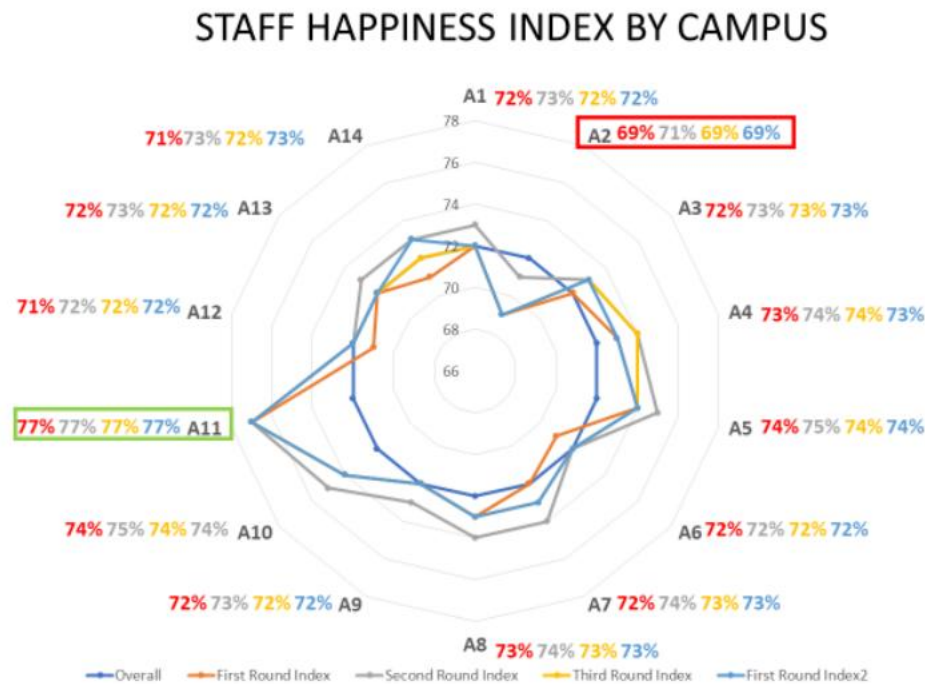


Fig. 2: University Happiness Index according to University Campus

The subsequent analysis is on the happiness index for each university campus. The findings are shown in Figure 2. Again, the campus name has not been disclosed due to confidentiality issues. One campus (A11) stands out from the rest, with a score of 77% across the four phases of the study, indicating that employees were generally satisfied with working at that campus. On the other hand, another campus (A2) scored the lowest across the four phases of the study, indicating that the employees were moderately unhappy working at that campus. Other campuses scored moderately on the overall happiness index.

Further analysis is required to determine the domains of happiness that contribute to the staff's overall happiness or unhappiness. This aspect is not discussed here as it is beyond the scope of this paper. The score of each domain provides valuable insights for top management at each campus to rectify the situations that lead to employees' feelings (Sakarji et al., 2021). The university's happiness index is a good practice that provides hard evidence to the top management in the areas that need improvement. The index is not intended to celebrate the campus with the highest score or reprimand the one with the lowest score but rather to serve as an indicator for further improvement (Sakarji et al., 2021).

5.0 Research Implications

5.1 Managerial Implications

These findings underscore the need for innovative methods to measure happiness. To develop policies that attract, cultivate, and retain employees, universities may make strategic decisions about enhancing working conditions. Make the most of the university's resources by investing in benefits that meet staff's needs and expectations. These findings underscore the importance of learning how to discern happiness. As a result, universities can make informed strategic decisions to enhance working conditions and establish policies that attract, develop, and retain employees. Thus, maximize resources by investing in employee benefits that meet their needs and expectations.

5.2 Theoretical Implications

The study's results have theoretical implications for understanding human happiness. In particular, the study expanded the theoretical understanding of the concept of happiness by proposing and validating a comprehensive happiness model comprising six domains and nine subdomains for assessing well-being, which considers both internal psychological factors and external environmental influences.

The model can be adopted by researchers interested in developing the nomological network of the construct by considering its antecedents and consequences. Significantly more effort must be invested in this endeavor for the sake of humanity worldwide.

5.3 Future Research Implications

This study can reach some conclusions about assessing employee happiness using the University Happiness Index. However, it also raises some issues or other dimensions or domains that should be measured in subsequent research, such as the happiness index from the Islamic perspective. Therefore, it is suggested that indicators of happiness be developed using Al-Ghazali's thoughts on happiness. Although deeply rooted in religiosity, Al-Ghazali's concept of happiness centers on aligning the human will with divine purpose, achieving inner peace through worship, knowledge, and purification, and ultimately attaining eternal bliss in the presence of God. It is worthwhile to explore these thoughts in order to develop a more comprehensive model of happiness.

6.0 Conclusion & Recommendations

In conclusion, a stable work environment within the university, defined by a consistent work culture, workload, and benefits packages, may contribute to consistent outcomes. Nonetheless, consistently moderate happiness levels may indicate a workplace that offers stability despite lacking excitement. Another issue is that the survey instrument itself has limits. It may not be sensitive enough to identify slight changes in happiness, particularly if the options or question structures remain unchanged from phase to phase. To better understand true employee sentiments, it is necessary to review survey data for domain-specific trends, analyze open-ended feedback, and conduct focus groups or interviews with employees from various departments. This enables the university to pinpoint specific areas for improvement despite consistently high overall satisfaction levels. Furthermore, the existing PERMAI model should be expanded to incorporate the Islamic concept of happiness, thereby making the model more comprehensive.

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Paper Contribution to Related Field of Study

This paper contributes to the field of organizational psychology by developing the University Happiness Index for measuring employee well-being.

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